

# A CLOSER LOOK



## RAPTOR MIGRATION

It may look like a scene from Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds" as a swarm of large birds circle high in the sky. Only you're not watching a movie, but standing in your back yard, or maybe on a prairie hilltop, viewing raptors in transit.

Each fall, millions of birds migrate south to warmer winter habitat. Raptors are one group of birds making this annual aerial trek, and one of the most visible as they travel during the day when wind conditions are better and prey is easier to spot.

While raptors feed on the occasional gamebird, prey is mostly rodents and insects. Longtime blame for thinning gamebird populations is nothing more than a bad rap.

North Dakota Game and Fish Department biologists hear comments each fall about how there appears to be a lot more hawks around than typical. There is good reason for that, as hawks that summered in Canada and Alaska are making their way through North Dakota in autumn, bringing with them juvenile birds making the trip for the first time.

Some species of raptors may migrate in flocks of a hundred or more birds. Many others, including most falcons, migrate individually. It is estimated that only one-quarter of juvenile raptors survive their first winter. Many raptors starve to death, some are electrocuted by power lines, others fly into buildings, and some are shot illegally.

The roster of raptors you can see during the fall migration, or at other times of the year in North Dakota, is long and interesting. There is the turkey vulture, an eagle-sized bird that sports a bare, reddish head, and feeds almost entirely on carrion; sharp-shinned hawk, a small raptor sometimes seen at backyard bird feeders eating house sparrows; Swainson's hawk, a large bird regularly seen perched on fence posts or telephone poles when not making its annual 17,000-mile trip to Argentina and back; ferruginous hawk, a true "prairie hawk" that feeds primarily on ground squirrels, but will also prey on grasshoppers, birds and lizards; the list goes on.

Raptors, whether en route to wintering grounds or hanging around North Dakota to nest and raise young, are important to the ecosystem as they help control rodent populations. One red-tailed hawk can eat more than 1,000 mice per year, for example, proving more efficient than any mousetrap ever built.

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**SANDRA HAGEN** is a Game and Fish Department nongame biologist.